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Derailroaded: Inside The Mind Of Larry Wild Man Fischer

MVD Entertainment Group // Unrated // March 22, 2011

List Price: \$16.95 [Buy now and save at Amazon]

Review by Bill Gibron | posted April 6, 2011 | E-mail the Author | Start a Discussion

The Product:

It's a sad story, one made even more melancholy by the subject of the tale. His name is Larry Fischer, and while few outside the fringe know of him, he imagines himself the biggest rock star in the world. He also envisions a society which persecutes and prohibits him from reaching his full music god potential. "Discovered" (and in his mentally ill mind, destroyed) by Frank Zappa and nurtured as part of the late '60s freak scene, the newly dubbed "Wild Man" hoped his simplistic, sing-along tunes would catch on with a jaded hippy demographic. A few years later, he was more or less homeless, panhandling on the streets near Rhino Records. From there, he experienced another renaissance, another series of disappointments, a remarkable collaboration with Barnes and Barnes, and a continuing concern over his schizophrenic, bi-polar personality. As of 2005, the year in which the fine documentary **Derailroaded** was release, Wild Man Fischer was a solid 'show business' casualty, living off the kindness of relatives and relegated to a one-off novelty act. Oddly enough, how much of his situation stems from his own demented perception is counterbalanced by a public structure which has little room for such a creative "eccentric".

The Plot:

Following a somewhat linear/flashback narrative, **Derailroaded** (the title taken from a song Fischer claims describes his treatment by the music industry) tries to explain the cult appeal and media import of outsider musician Larry "Wild Man" Fischer. His early childhood and formative years are touched upon, as are his famous collaborations with Frank Zappa and Barnes and Barnes ("Fish Heads"). Along the way, we get a portrait of undiagnosed and untreated mental illness, raging creativity without a serious outlet, dementia leading to dangerous bouts of paranoia, and vendettas against those (Dr. Demento, the late great leader of the Mothers of Invention) who Fischer believes wronged him. Sometimes, the disagreement is over money and the significant lack thereof. At other instances, Fischer seems locked in his own internal struggle, his vitriol aimed at the nearest (or most memorable) subject. Yes, there is a bit of a 'rags to riches to rags to really desperate rags' arc here, but for the most part, we get explanation and illustration, how a one man novelty shone brightly for one brief moment before fading into unhinged obscurity.

The DVD:

It's hard to say if Larry "Wild Man" Fischer deserves better. Like seminal surrealist acts before him - The Shaggs, Daniel Johnston - he's not really what one would call a traditional musician. He write ingenious nursery rhyme couplets that somehow get translated into recognizable singsong pop and yet no one is walking around circa 2011 whistling "My Name is Larry," "Go to Rhino Records," or "Monkeys vs. Donkeys." Those who've heard him have never forgotten the experience, but then again, it's hard to imagine him being embraced like some of the current outsider sensations clogging up the Internet. Fischer is that rarity, that frozen in time 'talent' that argues for meaning without ever establishing a precedent or point. He just seems "to be," unable to be crafted or invented on purpose. **Derailroaded** does a good job of arguing for who he is, giving various voices a

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chance to establish the benchmark that the music may not. Similarly, since most of Fischer's dealings have involved a close personal as well as professional relationship, the insights into his mixed up mindset are equally exposed.

There are moments within **Derailroded** that are absolutely painful to watch. Fischer has not aged well and definitely lives on the outermost fringes of what most would call normality. Through the kindness of a brother and an aunt he has food to eat and a roof over his head - for now. As he books random appearances and laments the lack of respect, you get the impression of someone willing to bite the hand that continually feeds him. Then a moment of near tragedy strikes and Fischer turns into a lost and very alone little boy, a childlike disconnect crossing his confused face. This is not a well man, we conclude, and the film plays voyeur while his mental state continues to deteriorate. Sure, there are moments of great joy in Larry's limited purview. When he's onstage, finding the "pep", fielding requests and yell-singing his heart out, you can feel the happiness radiating from within. But then there is a deeper, much darker side to the man that, upon arrival, makes for a profound level of sadness...and fear.

Since the main target of his anger - Frank Zappa - is no longer with us, **Derailroded** does feel only partially complete. While the famed composer's widow Gail is around to defend him, and we see a couple of archival interviews, there is a whole subtextual story lost due to death. Similarly, Bill Mumy of Barnes and Barnes (yes - Will Robinson of *Lost in Space* fame) is clearly a keeper of the Wild Man Fischer flame, and he can barely badmouth the man, arguing instead that he is often his own worst enemy. Luckily, director Josh Rubin doesn't flinch at showing the truth. There are scenes where recorded phone messages belie a manic, murderous intent. Then there are times when all we see is a dirty, disheveled old man wrestling with his demons while chewing mindlessly on a cheese sandwich. Since he never really had a moment of pure fame, since he was always a forced fixture on the outside looking in, the story of Larry "Wild Man" Fischer can't be much more than a tale of tragedy. But in this case, unlike others in similar distress, Mumy and the movie are right. Fischer has often been his own direct downfall. Part of the plunge are entertaining. Most are just miserable, however.

The Video:

Since it was obviously produced for TV at one time or another (this critic remembers seeing it a couple of years back on IFC or Sundance), the DVD preserves the 1.33:1 full screen framing. The image is excellent, if a bit scattered, but one should expect that from a transfer cobbled together from several sources (video, film, archival, stock). There are times when the age and rarity of the material utilized gives itself away, but for the most part, this is a decent looking digital presentation.

The Audio: Offered in Dolby Digital Stereo, the aural aspects of *Derailroded* are decent, if not truly polished. There is a camcorder recording-like flatness to the interviews and Fischer's music is mostly a cappella. That means that the speakers get little workout beyond words. Still, what we hear is crisp and clean with little distortion or drop-out.

The Extras:

There are two commentary tracks included on this DVD and both are worth a listen. The first finds director Rubin and his producer discussing how the project came about. The second features a phone call with Fischer that adds detail to an already rich portrait. We then get a series of deleted scenes, a few outtakes, a wonderful moment where Dolemite, aka Rudy Ray Moore, is exposed to the Wild Man for the first time (Rubin had heard a rumor that the comedian was a fan. He was wrong). All of this added content does a definitive job of fleshing out the film, giving it all new meaning and even more memorable.

Final Thoughts:

While heartbreaking and indirectly depressing, **Derailroded: Inside the Mind of Larry "Wild Man" Fischer** is also a very fine documentary indeed. It does what the genre does best - finding a worthy subject and exposing its significance to those who couldn't or can't. Yes, this film does go much, much deeper than that, but for the most part, this is a brave biopic where the man in the middle isn't quite sure what's happening. Easily earning a **Highly Recommended** both for its narrative and its infectious novelty elements, the story of Wild Man Fischer deserves to be told. It's both cautionary and cruel, explaining how one man's extroverted gift became a battle of will for both the maker and the marketers. While there may have been no ill intent, there is definitely a lot of bad blood. How much of said is still up for debate, especially when you consider the source of much of the protest.

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